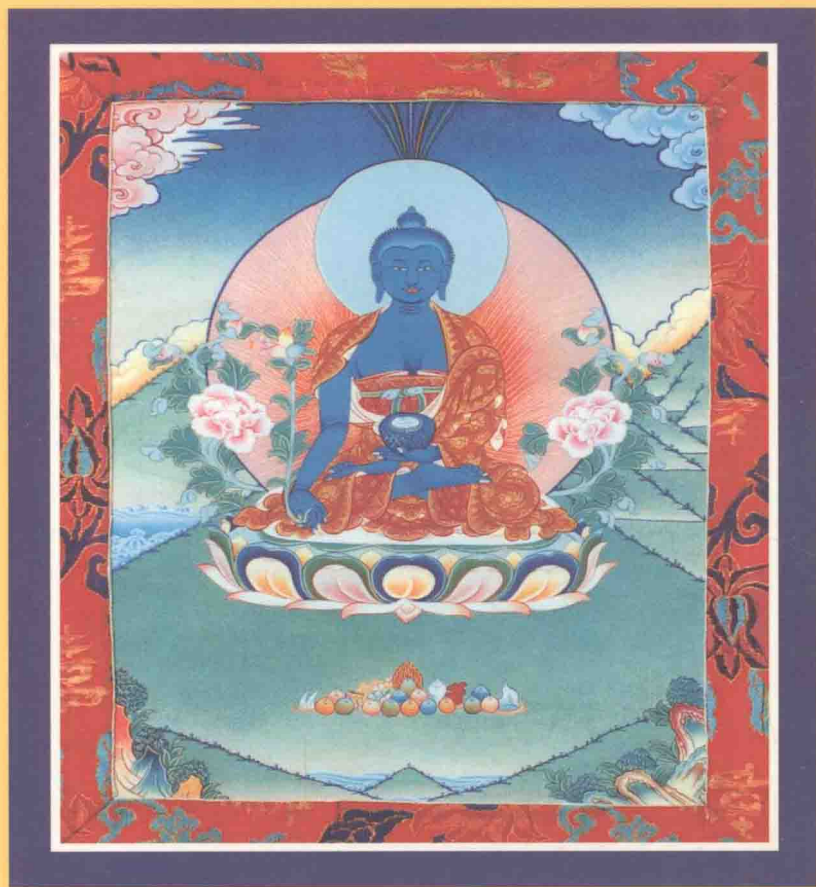


*The*  
**HAPPINESS  
PROJECT**



**TRANSFORMING THE THREE POISONS  
THAT CAUSE THE SUFFERING  
WE INFLICT ON OURSELVES AND OTHERS**

**Ron Leifer, M.D.**

# **THE HAPPINESS PROJECT**



**THE HAPPINESS PROJECT**  
**Transforming the Three Poisons**  
**That Cause the Suffering**  
**We Inflict on Ourselves and Others**

by Ron Leifer, M.D.

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*This book is dedicated to the liberation  
of human beings from the pain  
we inflict on ourselves and others.*

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If we view the world's religions from the widest possible viewpoint, and examine their ultimate goal, we find that all of the major world religions, whether Christianity or Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, are directed to the achievement of permanent human happiness.

*H.H. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama*

Only our searching for happiness prevents us from seeing it.

*Ven. Gendun Rinpoche*

If a way to the better there be,  
It lies in taking a full look at the worst.

*Thomas Hardy*





# **Introduction**



## CHAPTER ONE

# The Secrets of Happiness

An essential feature of 'being in the world' is therefore the danger of forgetfulness or ignorance. This forgetfulness turns the revealing of the awakened mind into a secret....

—Lodro Zangpo, *Vajradhatu Sun*

Everyone in the world wants to be happy. The desire for happiness is the universal wish of humankind. On this, everyone would agree. Yet everyone suffers and dies. The basic fact and the basic tragedy of life is that every human being longs for peace and happiness, yet everyone is haunted by the specter of suffering, unhappiness, and death.

This fact of life corresponds to the two basic motivations of life, which are the desire for happiness and the desire to avoid suffering and death. These are the standards by which we measure our days and our lives. The world is right with us if we are happy today and feel optimistic about the possibilities of future happiness. The world is bleak if we are unhappy today or have lost the hope of being happy tomorrow. We like, approve of, and defend that which we think will bring us happiness, and we dislike, condemn, and attack that which we think will bring us unhappiness, suffering, or death.

Although we all want lasting happiness, it is not easily found. Although we all fear suffering and death, they are not easily avoided. The secrets of happiness, therefore, are eagerly sought and highly treasured. Our search for knowledge is driven by the desire for happiness. We search for knowledge not out of some value-neutral curiosity,

but because we believe it will help us to gain some control over our lives and thereby to find happiness. We are interested in scientific knowledge not primarily because it gives us a true picture of the universe, but because it gives us the practical means to fulfill our desires. If science gave us a true picture of the world but magic gave us the means to achieve happiness, people would believe in magic, not in science.

### *The Search for Happiness Through Religion*

Historically, people have looked to religion for the secrets of happiness. There are many ways to view the search for happiness through religion. One way is to look at the two traditional religious paths: the exoteric and the esoteric. The exoteric path relies primarily upon a superior external agency—a god or a divine representative. People who rely upon God for happiness tend to believe that the secret is to please God by faithfully following divinely prescribed precepts. Intrinsic to this view is a principle of divine justice according to which God rewards the virtuous with happiness and punishes the sinner with suffering and death. This implies that the secret of happiness is virtue. As Mohandas Gandhi wrote, “The essence of religion is morality.”<sup>1</sup>

The idea that virtue is a precondition of happiness is a basic teaching of every religion in the world, although each may define virtue differently. For one religion virtue may be the avoidance of killing. For another it may be death in courageous battle. In each case, the believer is following the ethical precepts of his or her religion. The relationship between virtue and happiness is not always obvious or conscious, however. It is partially hidden. Many otherwise religious people seem to be unaware of it, or minimize its importance, which may be why they are so often caught in acts of corruption and hypocrisy. The relationship between virtue and happiness has been largely forgotten or deeply repressed in modern society. Recently, however, the insight is being rediscovered and revived in seminaries and amongst religious fundamentalists.

While exoteric believers search for happiness through faith and virtuous obedience to religious laws, others search for the keys to happiness through esoteric knowledge. Every religion has an esoteric tradition. In the West, under the impact of science, technology, and secularism, the appeal of traditional exoteric religions has diminished and the esoteric has become glamorous and popular. Many Western Jews

and Christians have become disillusioned, dissatisfied, or disinterested in the religion of their birth and instead look to esoteric traditions of the Orient for the secrets of happiness. Until very recently, these traditions have been inaccessible to Westerners. Today, many Eastern religions are available to Western seekers, particularly Buddhism. Many people read Buddhist literature, visit monasteries, and study with spiritual teachers, searching for the treasury of secrets to inner peace and bliss. If they are unfamiliar with Buddhism, it may seem mysterious and exotic, and this exoticism may easily be misinterpreted as esoteric.

There is an irony in this situation of which it is necessary to be aware, especially for the beginner. Many seekers of esoteric spiritual knowledge mistakenly believe that the source of this secret knowledge is outside themselves. They believe it is to be found in the words, books, and teachings which are possessed and closely guarded by an elite priesthood of knowing insiders. Or they regard it as a body of potent knowledge which is inaccessible or too difficult for ordinary mortals to understand. They tend, then, to worship the word, the texts, the teachers, and the images of God, looking to these for salvation, much as the exoteric believer does.

The irony is that, from the Buddhist point of view, esoteric, or secret, knowledge is not to be found in an outside power or agency. On the contrary. Buddha kept no secrets. He taught that "secrecy is the hallmark of false doctrine."<sup>2</sup> From the Buddhist point of view, esoteric wisdom means "self-secret." It consists of knowledge we hide from ourselves. No one is keeping secrets from us. Nor is esoteric wisdom too complex for us to understand. Esoteric wisdom consists of truths about ourselves and the nature of reality that we hide from ourselves. We also hide the fact that we hide them from ourselves, thus converting them into "secrets."

The core of the esoteric knowledge we seek consists of secrets we hide from ourselves. We hide from them because they are not what we want them to be. The world is not what we want it to be. Life is not what we want it to be. Others are not what we want them to be. We are not what we want ourselves to be. We hide from these truths because they mystify and terrify us. The terror of reality is expressed in the Old Testament story of God refusing to show his face to Moses because it would drive him mad.<sup>3</sup> This story is a metaphor for the fact that, actually, it is reality that drives us mad. We cannot face it and so

we struggle to put it out of mind, to repress and forget it. But reality is more powerful than we are. It bursts and leaks through our defenses and returns to haunt us in our nightmares, our neuroses, and our everyday worries.

After the Fall, Adam and Eve became ashamed of their nakedness and covered their genitals with fig leaves. This is a metaphor for one way that we hide from ourselves. We cover our bodies so we will not see that we are mortal animals. We hide ourselves from ourselves because we do not want to see our flaws, faults, weaknesses, and excesses. It would make us feel vulnerable and anxious. We will not confess our lies. We are ashamed to admit to ourselves that some of the things we want are forbidden, illegal, unethical, or fattening. We are taught to be considerate of others and so we are ashamed of and hide our selfishness. We do not want to admit to ourselves our unrelenting, selfish demandingness. At various times, we want more food, more sex, more pleasure of all kinds, more money, more equipment, more security, more power. We all want things to be as we want them to be—forever.

We are equally afraid to face our fears. We may appear to others to be self-confident, but nevertheless, we are all vulnerable to, and afraid of, failure, defeat, humiliation, loss, pain, and death. It is often difficult for us to clearly see our fear of death, and, therefore, our fears of life. We do not want to appear weak or neurotic. We do not want to admit our vulnerability or our confusion.

From the Buddhist point of view, the unwillingness or failure to see the facts of life as they are, to see ourselves as we are, and to conduct ourselves in harmony with these realities, is the chief cause of our self-inflicted suffering and, therefore, the chief obstacle to our happiness. This state of denial, or lack of realization of the facts of existence, is called *avidya* in Sanskrit—literally, “the failure to see, or know”—translated as “ignorance.” One of the great contributions of Gautama Buddha was the realization that ignorance is the primary cause of the sufferings we impose on ourselves and others.

If ignorance is the underlying cause of our self-inflicted suffering, then it follows that knowledge, or wisdom, is the remedy. The keys to the kingdom of happiness lie in wisdom. On this, most reasonable people would agree. The same insight can be phrased the other way around: What makes wisdom wise is that it helps us to find a greater degree of happiness and to reduce the load of sufferings we impose on ourselves and others.

Wisdom does not mean mere intellectual understanding, however. Intellectual understanding alone is not sufficient to enlighten the darkness of avidya. A mere intellectual understanding of the facts of existence will not change our habitual negative patterns of thought, speech, and action. The reason for this is that the intellect serves the ego, and the ego is a trickster who is continually the victim of its own trickery.

*Ego* literally means "I." Ego refers to "I," "me," "myself." Psychoanalysts, who first used the word to refer to self, typically defined ego as the psychological executive. The executive function of the ego is to mediate and moderate between the *id's* desires for pleasure and urges towards aggression and the super-ego's inhibitions and prohibitions. Thus, the ego is the product of, and would-be conciliator of, a split in the inner being of the human organism. This split is created by complex factors intrinsic to human nature, particularly the development of moral consciousness, the function of which is to differentiate good desires and fears from those that cause pain and suffering, and to promote choosing the good over the evil. The ego presides over this inner conflict as the mediator between our forbidden—illegal, immoral, or selfish—desires, and the prohibitions, inhibitions, and aversions to pursuing and satisfying them.

In such a dilemma, it is a difficult task to gracefully balance these competing psychic forces. Most of us cannot do it well. It requires a degree of maturity that most of us cannot achieve. Most people tend to be out of balance in one direction or the other: towards grasping for happiness through the desperate, compulsive, instant satisfaction of our desires, or towards rejecting, denying, and repressing desire and pleasure as if they are the doings of the devil.

The ego is a trickster in the sense that, as the discursive thinker and speaker in the name of the person, it is also the locus of the lies we tell ourselves. Ego can rationalize and justify both selfish desires and self-denial. We are all clever enough to be selfish and deny it, or hide it, or disguise it as love or generosity. We can repress and isolate our feelings of fear while justifying the accompanying inhibitions as prudence or caution. People often say that "life is tricky." True, but not because life is trying to trick us. No one, or nothing, is trying to trick us. We trick ourselves. In the words of Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, "Things are very tricky. They are very tricky, and they play tricks on you spontaneously. There's nobody who is the game-maker, who conceives of the game. Nobody's playing tricks on you. But things as they are are full of trickery."<sup>4</sup>



We cannot achieve wisdom without seeing through the trickery of the ego which denies truths it does not wish to see. This requires changing our habitual patterns of thought and action. These habitual patterns, which have been developed unconsciously, out of the ignorance of pure selfishness, so to speak, create the rebounding karmic ripples which cause our sufferings. To be truly wise, our understanding of the facts of existence must penetrate to the “heart which fully realizes.”

This means that in order to *realize*—as opposed to merely understanding—the truths about ourselves and the facts of existence, we must undergo a personal transformation. The time it takes for any particular person to do this varies widely. Some people are transformed by one radical experience. For others, the process may take a lifetime or, as some Buddhists like to say, *lifetimes*.

The price of avidya, or ignorance, is high. The price is pain and suffering, depending upon the degree of ignorance. The habitual denial and repression of the facts of existence results in the suffering of negative emotions such as anxiety, stress, anger, depression, guilt, shame, and so on. These negative emotions, in turn, motivate negative actions, which create negative situations, which stimulate more negative thoughts and emotions. Denial creates these negativities because it requires us to struggle futilely to evade realities we cannot escape. Inevitably and continuously, the facts break through our defenses and force their reality upon us.

Thus, realizing the “secret” truths that yield the harvest of inner peace and equanimity requires a journey within. This means a journey into our own minds in order to understand and transform our negative thinking, negative emotions, and negative actions. This, in turn, requires an inquiry into the nature of mind and of phenomena. This inner quest is the essence of the spiritual journey. I once asked Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery in Woodstock, New York, to define “spiritual.” His answer was, “Anything having to do with mind.”

Like every mission into the unknown, the spiritual journey requires courage. We must be brave enough to look at what we do not want to see. We must have the courage to admit what we want and what we fear. The spiritual journey requires honesty, an honesty that can detach enough from desire and fear to acknowledge observable facts and reasonable analysis. It also requires taking responsibility for our thoughts, feelings, and, especially, our actions. Responsibility is “response-ability”—the ability to respond appropriately to what we see